

Maritime Museum of San Diego
MAINS'L

Vol. 47:1 & 2 Winter/Spring 2011
HAUL

\$11.95

A Journal of Pacific Maritime History



PREHISTORY

Pacific Seafarers and Maritime Cultures

Getting to Know Daisy Cave

by Don P. Morris

Illustrations by Susan H. Morris



"It belongs in Alaska, not California," a Coast Guardsman once remarked of San Miguel Island, the westernmost island in the Channel Islands chain. This string of four islands is the partially submerged remnant of Santarosae, the massive island that stretched all the way to Anacapa Island, comprising all the land exposed at the height of the past glacial maximum, 100 meters below present sea level. Its shoreline at the height of the last Pleistocene glaciation, 20,000 years ago, encompassed roughly 500,000 acres, about ten times the extent of the present island of Santa Rosa.

Since that time the ocean has risen, creating the now separate islands of Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Anacapa, that, together with San Miguel Island, comprise the northern Channel Islands and the bulk of Channel Islands National Park.

Protruding into the Pacific Ocean beyond the shelter of Point Conception, San Miguel Island, contoured by ever present winds, presents a rounded sleek appearance to the approaching traveler, who soon becomes aware of the wind's constant presence. Volcanic rocks resist erosion by both wind and water and provide prominent headlands like Hoffman and Bay Points along the northern shoreline. Within Bay Point lies Daisy Cave.

Daisy Cave appeals to anyone traveling on San Miguel Island, as I realized on my first visit to the site. As I crept around the wind-blasted cliff into its sheltering confines, I immediately thought, "I am going to remember this place if I ever have to spend the night out." Combined with its location on a steep shoreline that has migrated very little during rising Holocene sea levels, the Daisy has been a great place to seek refuge for thousands of years, a sheltering haven on an island renowned for its blasting winds.

The most sheltered portion of the site is **Cave A**, a forty-foot relic sea cave. Its inner reaches remain calm in any kind of weather. Flanking Cave A to the east is an open rock shelter which saw extensive occupation. A midden extends from the shelter and the cave down slope to a vertical sea cliff.

Today the site is renowned for its evidence of human occupation during the Early Holocene. Its situation on a remote island demands that we accept that early migrants to the New World possessed some sort of watercraft capable of making the challenging passage from the mainland at a time when they were thought to only possess the skill to hunt mammoth and other Pleistocene mega fauna. It now appears that early inhabitants had a taste for seafood as well. With the ability to cross challenging stretches of ocean, it leads one to consider that early peoples might well have followed the coast down into North America from Beringia, the land now submerged beneath the Bering Sea.

This information from Daisy Cave did not come easily or quickly. The chronicle of successive research efforts at the site shows an often rocky, twisting path to knowledge, often beset with daunting logistical, transportation, and financial concerns.

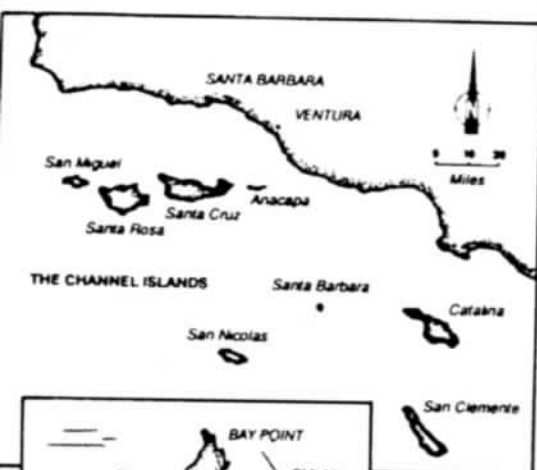
Unfortunately, the first excavations at Daisy Cave were not scientific in nature. Nineteenth-century ranchers on the island favored the Cave as a picnic locality, and they may have created the scene evident to the first archaeologist to work at the site, Charles Rozaire, who began excavations at the Daisy in 1967, and noted that numerous burials at the site had been disturbed. Early archaeological expeditions at the close of the nineteenth century may have also contributed to the confusion.

Prior to digging at Daisy Cave, Rozaire had completed, at the behest of the U.S. Navy, an extraordinarily comprehensive archaeological survey of San Miguel Island in the 1960s. His base of operations was the early twentieth-century ranch house, at the time lapsing into a state of genteel disrepair. The base camp was reached by plane, utilizing a dirt strip adjacent to the ranch house, the result of naval operations on the island, which had functioned as an aerial bombardment range during the Korean War. Just to add to the excitement, there was unexploded ordinance present on the island.

Working at Daisy Cave involved a round trip walk of four to five miles, mostly cross country with no established trail, and no facilities at the site.

Don Morris came to Channel Islands National Park in 1985, after working at many Park Service areas in Arizona and New Mexico. During his tenure at the Park, he worked on many projects there, from very early material research like that found at Daisy Cave to historic shipwrecks. He was fortunate in making many fine discoveries, the best among them being his wife, Susan, thereby demonstrating that not all archaeology is sheer drudgery. He is now retired in Ventura, California.

Susan Morris has been doing cartography and illustration for archaeology, geology, and paleontology projects in the Channel Islands since 1987. She received her Certificate in Archaeology from UCLA in 1993, following time spent in the publishing industry and UC program administration. Susan has directed archaeological research on Santa Rosa Island, as well as published and given presentations on cave-associated archaeological sites of the Channel Islands. Her current research project is an educational web resource to be hosted by Channel Islands National Park, comparing the real events surrounding the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island with those depicted in the award-winning children's book, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O'Dell.



DAISY CAVE/CAVE A

CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK SAN MIGUEL ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

DAISY CAVE

SITE: SMI 261

TRANSIT & TAPE SURVEY BY:
D. Morris, P. Sneathkamp

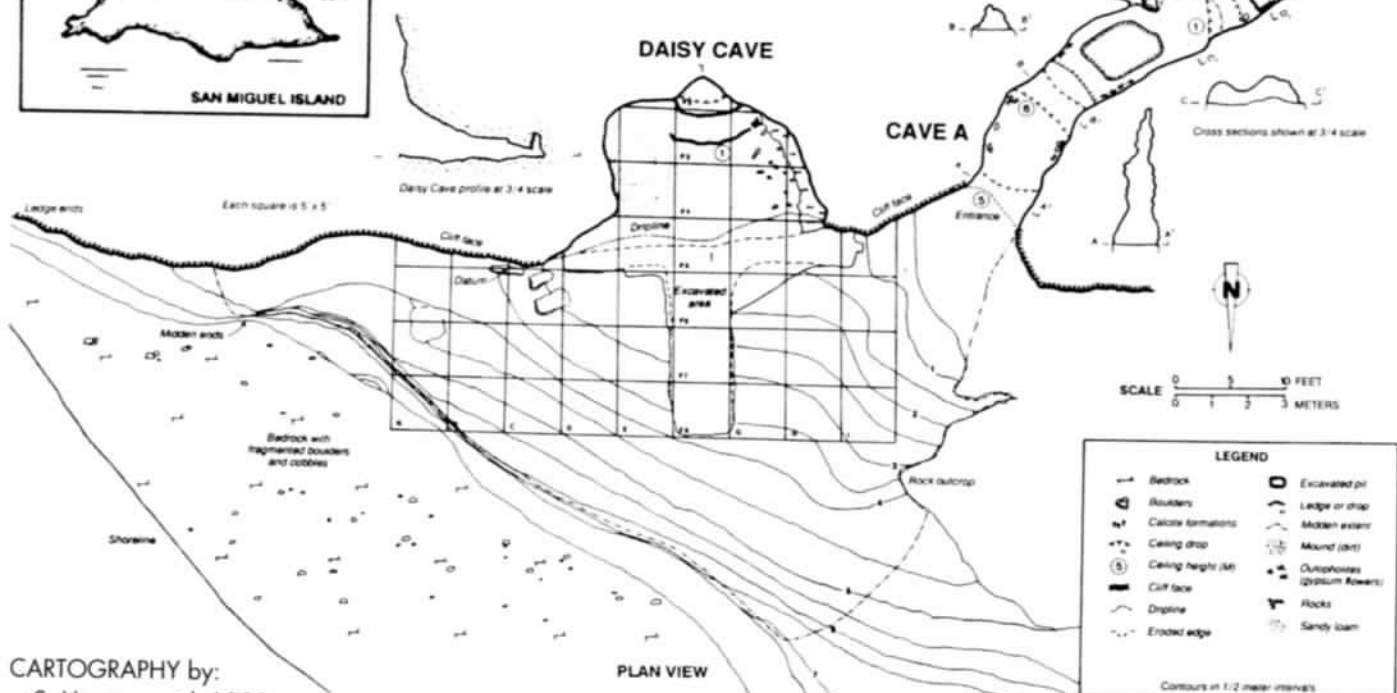
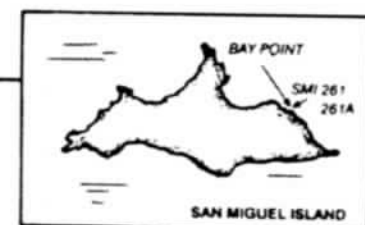
DATE: July 1986

CAVE A

SITE: SMI 261A

COMPASS & TAPE SURVEY BY:
S. Hammersmith, D. Morris

DATE: February 1989



CARTOGRAPHY by:
S. Hammersmith 1989

It can be a wonderful trip, but after a grueling day of digging, the hike back to camp can make for a rough ending to a long day.

Occasionally, the logistical support was sketchy. Rozaire and his crew were once marooned on the island for four extra days, required to revive the aboriginal practice of foraging shellfish from the tide pools, simply because someone in the Navy had forgotten about their trip. Even today, carrying extra food to the island is a good idea since bad weather often alters one's departure plans.

Rozaire excavated extensively at Daisy Cave, removing material from the "shelter" portion of the site and trenching through the deposits lying outside the shelter, as well as digging within the cave portion of the site. Here he encountered a number of disturbed burials, the result of previous unknown exploration at Daisy Cave. In accord with the general practice at the time, material was collected in five and ten arbitrary centimeter levels. In his final report, Rozaire dated the earliest portion of the site to around 3,000 years ago on the basis of the artifacts found within the deposit. He noted the presence of some earlier artifacts, but did not consider them to be significant.

One problem (in retrospect) was the lack of radiocarbon dating. The research budgets of the 1960s simply did not include funds for this relatively new technique. Rozaire attempted to obtain free dating at the UCLA radiocarbon laboratory, but this effort never yielded results.

Here matters rested for several years. Daisy Cave was regarded as a relatively late site with very good preservation — Rozaire had recovered over four-hundred pieces of cordage as well as a quite remarkable bead-making kit from the uppermost layers, but its chronology seemed to be rather unremarkable.

By the 1980s Dan Guthrie, who as a graduate student had analyzed some of the animal bones from the midden, became intrigued by the presence of a Pleistocene mouse (*Peromyscus nesodytes*) and another Pleistocene form, a vampire bat (*Desmodus stocki*). Something was amiss if these forms had truly persisted on the islands until 3,000 years ago. He asked the National Park Service in 1986 for permission to conduct further sampling at Daisy Cave. This time radiocarbon dating was definitely included in the budget.

By the time logistical support had improved there were fairly regular administrative flights to the island and additional charters were available for a price. The first "ranger station", a 10' x 12' wall tent, was replaced in 1985 with a station constructed around two forty-foot long shipping containers. Although this arrangement would later be cited to Congress as a prime example of inadequate NPS housing, it was pretty lush at the time. It provided the ability to take hot showers (you heated the water on the stove first) and you could prepare your morning gruel out of the wind.

Guthrie partnered with Pandora Snethcamp in 1986, who was conducting research for the National Park Service, the agency now charged with the management of the island as a part of the newly created Channel Islands National Park. Also involved was the new archaeologist for the park (the author). The trenches left by Rozaire greatly facilitated further excavation and analysis. Radiocarbon samples were secured from the cultural strata that were now clearly evident.

The results were radically different from the original age estimate. In fact, all the radiocarbon samples dated older than the earliest estimated date of 3000 BP. Down deep in the midden, from a stratum exposed earlier, an abalone shell yielded a date greater than 10,000 years old. In classic fashion, this finding raised at least as many questions as it answered. Was this very old abalone shell truly associated with human occupation?

Snethcamp was not able to conduct additional work at the site, but she recommended a newly minted Ph.D. at UCSB, Jon Erlandson (see pgs. 8-13), who had worked with early material on the southern California mainland. In due course, a "get acquainted" trip to San Miguel Island developed.

I have fond memories of that trip. Like a kid with a great, new toy, Jon jumped into additional work at Daisy, digging carefully in the older material just outside the shelter and recovering some remarkable material, including a shapeless blob of cordage that turned out to be the remnants of the oldest sandal recovered on the West Coast (it dated between 9,800 - 8,600 years ago).

The earliest levels of the site were almost as old as the Clovis culture on the mainland — the classic big game hunting group in North America. The inhabitants at Daisy Cave were not eating mammoth, but were subsisting on seafood. Requiring a boat of some sort to reach the island and well adapted to the coastal environment, they contrasted sharply with mainland big game hunters.

Additional work by Erlandson and his students have shown that Daisy Cave is not unique on San Miguel Island. Additional sites older than 8,000 years are known to exist on the northwest coast, the south coast and the east end. Some of these are the lowest strata in previously recorded sites, and some are extremely subtle and brand new.

Work on San Miguel Island is now facilitated by a new ranger station, put into service in 1999. The guest quarters alone are about the size of the previous ranger station and provide very good accommodations for workers on the island. What a difference! One can return from the field, cook a meal and clean up and comfortably review work, polish up notes, and plan the next step in a field project, followed by sound and restful sleep. The weather and isolation of the island still remain and work on San Miguel at the Daisy, and elsewhere, will remain adventurous.

Notes

For an in depth review of the findings at Daisy Cave see:

Jon M. Erlandson, Douglas J. Kennett, B. Lynn Ingram, Daniel A. Guthrie, Don P. Morris, Mark A. Tveskov, G. James West and Phillip L. Walker,

"An Archaeological and Paleontological Chronology for Daisy Cave (CA-SMI-261), San Miguel Island, California," *Radiocarbon*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1996, p. 355-373.

Daisy Cave

*Photo by Robert Schwemmer,
Maritime Heritage Program,
West Coast Regional Coordinator,
NOAA*

